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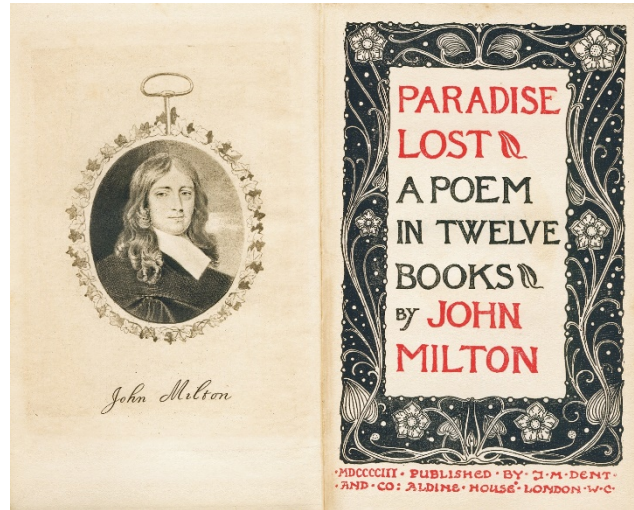
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Paradise Lost and the Puritan Movement

Peyton Murphy
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In the early 1660's, English poet and writer John Milton was a man whose life was in turmoil. He had lost his government job, his home, and was forced into hiding by the return of England's monarch.¹ England in the mid-seventeenth century was country in turmoil – the ousting of King Charles I by Presbyterian and Puritan powers from governmental rule



Title page of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, published by J.M. Dent, London 1903.

in 1642 led to a series of failed attempts at democracy and church reform that, ultimately, resulted in the reestablishment of the monarchy in 1660.² After enjoying a long period of influence, Puritans (Nonconformists)³ and their sympathizers were persecuted and oppressed in order ensure the Restoration was a success. Milton was amongst those who were once again in the margins. It was out of this situation, however, that emerged one of the great works of “English as well as Christian literature”: *Paradise Lost*.⁴

Before moving into the style, message, and legacy of *Paradise Lost* in the English-speaking world, some context must be given for the Puritan tradition it grew from, and with which author John Milton was closely associated. Those who would later be called Puritans belonged to a group that believed that England's Reformation of the church did not go far

¹ For more information on John Milton's life, political involvement and thoughts see the article “The Life of John Milton.”

² Harold Bloom, *John Milton* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 14-25.

³ Nicholas Von Maltzahn, "The First Reception of 'Paradise Lost' (1667). (John Milton's Epic)." *The Review of English Studies* (47, no. 188, 1996: 479-499).

⁴ George Kurian, “Milton, John (1608-1674)” in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, ed. George Kurian (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011), 1518.

enough.⁵ They desired for the Anglican church to both remove remaining vestments of Catholicism regarding ceremony and tradition, and to establish a more Presbyterian church like the one that existed to the north in Scotland.⁶ They were staunch Calvinists and desired a nation and church that mirrored Calvin's Geneva: civilized, simple, and austere. They emphasized God's sovereignty, human sinfulness, and made extensive use of Old Testament scripture to serve as illustrative examples of what it looked like to live a moral and Christian life.⁷ They viewed the Bible the final word regarding all matters, superseding tradition and human reason. They also largely resisted the exercise of the kings' authority over Parliament, who they saw as the greatest agent of reform in the country. When civil war erupted in England in 1639, Puritans in Parliament, who had the support of the clergy and laity, took control of the government.⁸ This was the movement that Milton was closely associated with (for he was an avid advocate for church reform and moral piety), though he would not have called himself a Puritan. This was also the government that collapsed and left him destitute, no longer being provided with protection or support. It was with this backdrop that *Paradise Lost* emerged.

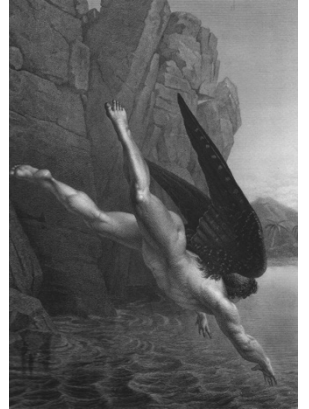
⁵ W. Reginald Ward, "Puritans", *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*. Edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (P-Sh ed. Vol. 4. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 456.

⁶ Alvin J Schmidt, "Puritans and Pilgrims" in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, ed. George Kurian (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011), 1912.

⁷ Harold Bloom, *John Milton* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 14-25.

⁸ W. Reginald Ward, "Puritans", *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*. Edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (P-Sh ed. Vol. 4. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 457.

In short, *Paradise Lost* tells the story of the Fall from grace – both that of Man, and of Satan. The story begins before the creation of the world with demonic forces cast down into the lake of fire that is hell. From here they regroup, and begin their plot to distort God's creation, because they know they cannot harm him directly. So, Satan travels to earth and finds man and woman, and from this point it is in many ways a mythologized and expanded retelling of the well-known Genesis account of the Fall. Satan tempts Eve to sin first, then Adam joins her. They eat the fruit though they have been warned explicitly to watch out for the serpent, who is full of lies.



Throughout the story, God is watching over all. He knows what Satan is plotting and can see what the future holds. He knows that mankind will need a savior, even before Adam and Eve eat the fruit. Without hesitation, the Son volunteers to be that sacrifice that will redeem mankind and restore Paradise to the earth. In the meantime, however, man and woman must leave the Garden. The archangel Michael is sent to escort them from the Garden but shows Adam a vision of things to come before they go. Before his eyes, Adam sees the passing of time and the trajectory of man: Cain and Able, Noah and the Flood, the Patriarchs to Moses, the selection and failure of the nation of Israel, and times of Exile and oppression. At the end, though he sees the coming of the Messiah, God's Son, who conquers death in his first coming and undoes it in his second. Though the devil may think he won, God has had a plan of redemption all along. God did not want his followers to be without a will. He gave all a choice, just as he did the angels, to choose him or reject him. After Adam realizes this, it is time for Michael to seal off the Garden. Adam leaves the Garden with Eve, saddened about their newfound separation from God, but ultimately hopeful because of the redemption that is found in the Son. Together, Adam and Eve head out to make a life for themselves in this new world.

John Milton structured *Paradise Lost* in a style that a short summary simply cannot capture. In form it draws inspiration from the works of Homer, Virgil, and Dante.⁹ It is an epic poem in the classical sense: “it is about men, it is historically true, and it is tragic.”¹⁰ *Paradise Lost* consist of 10,000 lines of blank verse poetry divided into twelve books, in the same way *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are organized.¹¹ Similarly, Milton orated his epic to an amanuensis, as Milton was totally blind at the time he composed *Lost*. It was, like the Homeric works that inspired it, meant to be heard rather than read,¹² though it acceptable in both forms. What is unique about *Lost* is its purpose. It is not made to exemplify virtue or valor, nor is an allegorical representation of a biblical concept, it is not even primarily to produce a mythologized account of Creation – *Paradise Lost* was written, in Milton’s own words, to “justify the ways of God to men.”¹³ It was supposed to be devotional in nature, to help fallen humanity draw close and understand the Divine in a way that was both familiar and lofty. *Paradise Lost* sought to bring Christianity all the way down from a cosmic to the personal level, reflecting the choices and actions of the individual. In this way, it was very Puritan.

Members of the Puritan conviction often kept of a journal for religious reasons. In it, they would recount their sins, their struggles, and their hardships, so that they would have a comprehensive list that they could present before God in repentance. At its core, this practice was about recognizing the fallenness of man’s sinful state, and the hope that came that God offered forgiveness to those who were his children. *Paradise Lost* is, in a way, John Milton’s

⁹ George Kurian, “Milton, John (1608-1674)” in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, ed. George Kurian (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011), 1518.

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Galaxy Book; GB-57. London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 14.

¹¹ George Kurian, “Milton, John (1608-1674)” in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, ed. George Kurian (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011), 1518.

¹² Harold Bloom, *John Milton* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 26.

¹³ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Merrit Y. Hughes (Fifth ed. New York, NY: Odyssey Press, 1935), line 26.

well-formulated journal entry, because he is doing much the same thing. In a manner in which he hopes his readers can relate, Milton channels his failures and struggles – his disillusionment with humankind's weakness and injustice, his inability to be right with God, his shortcomings in choosing good over evil, his tendency to identify more closely with the character of the devil than the Father – into creating a work that highlights unapologetically the sinful choice that man made to turn away from God, but concludes that God is even greater than the power of sin and death, and will by his Son reestablish Paradise once again.¹⁴ Milton takes the hardship and bitterness he has experienced in life and with it tells the story of the first struggle between good and evil – but ultimately ends with a glimmer of hope by the sovereignty of God.

Reception to *Paradise Lost* upon its release in 1667 was overall positive, with some opposition. Some, especially those within the Anglican church and other more traditional institutions disliked Milton's epic.¹⁵ They recognized the Puritan elements within it and the covert political messages it conveyed and were afraid that the talk of devils and spiritual forces might unsettle the people; nevertheless, the government approved of its publishing.¹⁶ Others, who were more Nonconformist in nature, praised Milton for his ingenuity and inspired purpose. Of special note was his emphasis on practical obedience to God, how the Lord's mercy was shown through suffering, and the vivid imagery he gave to both heaven and hell, which were simultaneously physical places and states of being. Milton felt as though his work was divinely inspired, that his epic could perhaps even play a secondary, doctrinal role in Christian life.¹⁷ At the very least, it could be said that imagery from *Paradise Lost* has played a role in shaping

¹⁴ Harold Bloom, *John Milton* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 26.

¹⁵ Nicholas Von Maltzahn, "The First Reception of 'Paradise Lost' (1667). (John Milton's Epic)." *The Review of English Studies* (47, no. 188, 1996: 479-499).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Harold Bloom, *John Milton* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 26.

English-speaking church's understanding of angels and demons, heaven and hell. This is especially true in America, where Puritan preachers of later times such as Jonathan Edwards would use vivid imagery and the threat of hell to quicken the hearts of his parishioners regarding the state of their souls. In Anglo-American Christian circles, Milton is like Shakespeare – such a part of the culture that often we do not even know the original source. Perhaps, then, in this way his wish was fulfilled: he is a part of the unofficial canon.

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